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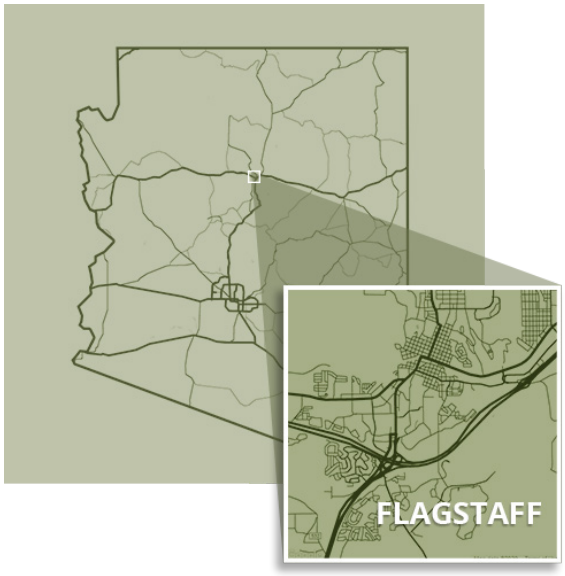
FLAGSTAFF: HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS REQUIREE LISTENING AND ADJUSTING

The Coconino County Adult Probation Department is housed in a beige one-story building just east of downtown Flagstaff, not far from Route 66. To enter the building is to look at one's self—the windows and doors are made with mirrored glass. Certainly, it can't be a bad thing to ask formerly incarcerated adults, now on probation, to look closely at themselves, but a team of probation officers and artists say everyone else in town could benefit from such introspection as well.

Which is why they posed the questions, "What is a healthy relationship? What does it mean to relate in healthy ways to others?" not only to their clients—adults on probation—but to all community members who came to a series of art events they offered in 2018 and 2019. During these events, they were aiming to create spaces for healthy relationships and to invite personal and visual reflections on their questions to then inform a mural to be painted on the probation office building itself.



"Our goal was to make it a more comfortable place for our clients, so they could walk in and feel a sense of ease and trust," said Mike Olsen, the community restitution coordinator of the Coconino County Adult Probation Department and the Creative Communities Initiative (CCI) team leader. "Right now, they feel the opposite of that. They feel tense. One guy described it as a step below suicidal when he walked in there."

Their secondary goal, they say, was to create a bridge between adults on probation, often stigmatized because of past behaviors, and the larger community. Or, in other words, they wanted to create opportunities for healthy relationships to exist in Flagstaff.

The day I arrived to visit the team, a half dozen men either were

Community painting event at Creative Spirits. Photograph by Maddie Adams.

rinsing paintbrushes or standing around waiting for lunch. They'd spent all morning, and the previous day, painting four mural panels, designed by artist Maddie Adams and informed by interviews with many community members, adults on probation, and probation officers about healthy relationships.

The men appeared relaxed and hungry. A few of them kept wandering in and out of the studio, looking at the panels, each of which reflected a different concept.

In their assessment of the project's impact, team members said its most immediate impact was on clients. "You can see the guys who are working, just the concentration, the focus they have, how they want to do this right and everything. That is pretty easy to see," said Mike Olson, team leader.

First Friday community input event for Healthy Relationships. Photo by Stephanie Gerst.

Their work that weekend was to finish painting the panels, which would then be installed on the exterior of the adult probation building.

"This is a building that has this stigma around it. Community members think 'I don't want to be near that.' Maybe they don't want to be involved with the people coming in and out of the building," said Adams. "This shifts that a little bit, especially because people inside the building helped create it."

Earlier activities in the project included two First Friday community canvas paintings, in which participants were invited to paint images of healthy relationships and be interviewed about what they made. They also conducted more in-depth interviews using a technique called Forensic Experiential Traumatic Interviewing (FETI), with community members, probation officers, and adults on probation, and then a random mix of people who responded to us through an open call.

From these activities, the group distilled responses to four words--Connection, Safety, Growth, and Trust—to characterize healthy relationships.

Throughout the project, the team faced small challenges involving basic communication and scheduling, especially given that the artist lives in Phoenix, not Flagstaff.

But the biggest lesson came halfway through the project when the team was ready to present a completed project design for approval from their clients—adults on probation. The design had been informed by all of the project interviews and artwork. They gathered on a December day, excited to share Adams' designs, which incorporated paragraphs of text pulled from those interviews.

The clients balked. They were not thrilled about the designs.

"Some of our clients were almost offended by what we had come up with. They didn't think it was authentic," Olson said. "There were certain words in there that they thought triggered them in a bad way. They didn't think people wanted to come read something unless it was a single … word. People wanted to see colors, images."

The team was surprised by the negative response. Gerst said she was "madder than a wet hen." But in time, Gerst and the others felt grateful for the hiccup, as it ensured the work remained true to its intent. "I'm so glad that that happened, because we do have something that is what they're proud of."

Regrouping and revising the work was an important part of serving their clients fairly. "It was also our opportunity to put our money where our mouth is," Gerst said. "We either listen to our clients and are receptive to their

desires or we're not. And for that to be coming from a government agency that's even more profound, that we really have chosen to listen to our clients."

Adams said that while critique was new for her teammates, as an artist she's more accustomed to it. "This was their first really harsh critique and it was not filtered in any way. I knew it was the first round."

And, as with many art projects, it was a process that really helped refine the artwork. "We were shoving [the material] through a tender funnel," Adams said. "The first time we sat down and talked about healthy relationships, these four words [that we ended up with] probably came up, but so did 60 others. So it was the research that went out and then came back into the final product. I think we needed to do that in order to get to this point."

In the end, Adams designed four panels abstracting images and concepts from the interviews and the community art events. "In order to build a community artwork, we needed community participation," she said, adding that the process invited her to approach artmaking differently.

She wasn't simply "making something beautiful," she said, rather, "I have to make something that is the end result of everything that we have done, and I have to trust my ability to represent artistically as well."

Gerst said she learned from Adams how to trust the process. "I think at that moment in time, she was the bridge. She was the one that kept her cool and was receptive and thinking, 'Yes, okay, we can do this.'"

Some of the CCI trainings on intersectionality also raised questions for the team about the artwork itself. Because of that, they consulted with a local indigenous artist Shonto Begay to provide input on the designs, which was useful for Adams. "When I showed him my drafts, he was like, yes, good. Put this in there. You're good. So that was actually very empowering," she said.

First Friday community input event for Healthy Relationships. Photo by Stephanie Gerst.

The day the men came to paint them, all the team members were nervous, unsure of how things would turn out. They were pleasantly surprised.

“The way our clients came in and just really took over—we gave them very little instruction, and they just started going for it,” Olson said.

As go-betweens, probation officers, artists, and organizers reflected on the similarities they saw between both communities they worked with. Both communities defined healthy relationship similarly. Adams said the project team helped build a bridge between adults on probation and [the] larger community they’re a part of. “We’re kind of a conduit for that conversation to continue, that really this side [community members] is not different than this side [adults on probation]. We’re serving as that in-between for the two different worlds,” she said.

While the impact of the artwork in public remains to be seen, Olson said the project made him more compassionate to others. “It’s made me think more deeply about how intertwined we all are. It’s not this big gap that separates our clients on probation from us. Most of us have experienced trauma. And, you know, I was one different decision away from being probably on probation due to the trauma I experienced.”

Gerst said the project strengthened her sense of faith and trust in both others and in a process. “I tend to be very organized and structured. I’m going to use an Excel spreadsheet to identify every waking moment of the day. I’m going to sleep here for seven hours and do this, this, this--very structured. But I would say that this [project impacted] my perspective on art and change and how it affects the community in that, it’s going to happen. I may not know the answer, but I know it’s going to work out. I think this project in particular has increased that faith that I have,” she said.

Adams echoed that sense of trust. “There’s so much energy wasted in us being nervous about how [things will work out]. I learned a lot of trust in my team as far as how we responded to how things went in December. They kind of created this space for me to go back to the drawing board while they handled all this going on out here. That was a new dynamic for me.”

Olson hopes the artwork, once it’s up on the building, invites a more nuanced understanding of change and what is possible, both for adults on probation and the general public. When he first started working as an adult probation officer, he says, clients could either follow rules or get locked up. There were few second chances. Although things are less austere now, he says, he believes the spectrum of choices involved in creating artwork, from beginning to end, can have positive effects on people. “I can’t see how that wouldn’t make somebody who was involved [in the paintings] go home today and feel some of that in their life, too,” Olson said. “It’s one of those things where it’s not like hitting the nail on the head with a hammer. It’s a more subtle thing. But when you go through the process, it changes you enough subtly that eventually, it does change you.”

He and the others hope that the work will impact those participants for a long time,” Olson said. “When they walk up to that building, they’re going to see the [panels] they did, and they’re going to identify with that like, I was a part of that. I was part of what made that happen.”